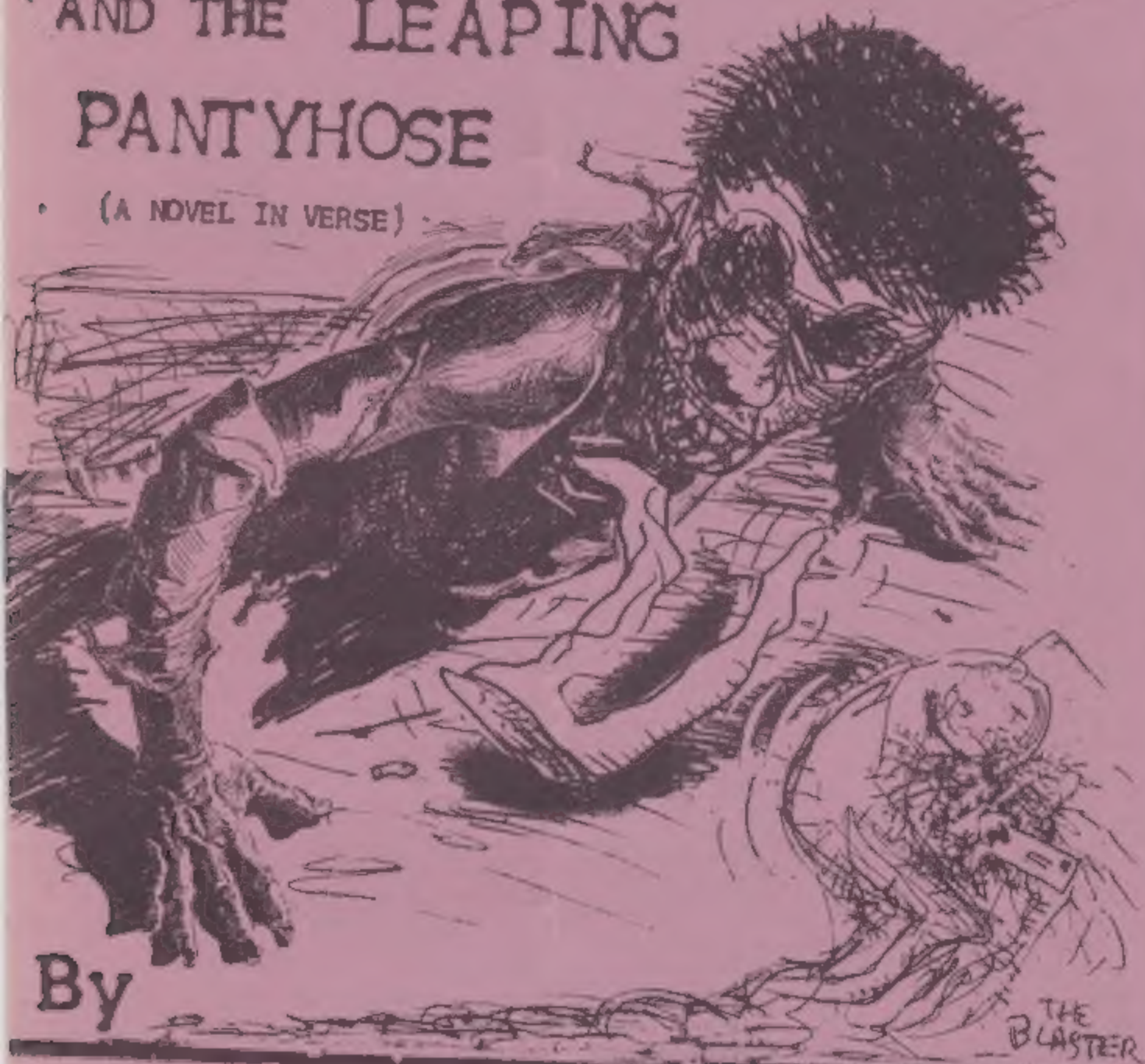


THE KISSING BUG, THE MYSTERIOUS LETTER, 'AND THE LEAPING PANTYHOSE

(A NOVEL IN VERSE)



By

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Orton Pesary's career as a kissing bug began on October 23, 1967. That was the day he got the mysterious letter. When his mother came home that afternoon from her job at the beet tannery and found him sitting at the dining room table, instead of in his regular horizontal position on the sofa, she saw instantly that something was up, since normally Orton was too lazy to piss down his leg if his feet were on fire. He sat hunched there at the table in the dining room with the mysterious letter clutched in his hand, and there was a strangeness about his face and eyes—the absent yet faraway look of one who has just heard a ghostly voice speaking in a room where no voice should be—or of one who has perhaps just eaten a pound of chicken feed by mistake. It was enough to make Mrs. Pesary feel distinctly uneasy, so that she actually went and stood quite close to her son for once.

"What's wrong with you?" she said. "You look funny."

In truth, this was probably not the best choice of words, since you could have said that Orton Pesary had always looked "funny", although, to give him his due, "funny" is perhaps too mild and innocuous a word to use in connection with how he had always looked. In fact, considering his dark, beetling demeanor, his little round mouth and his long, rather crowded front teeth (actually all his teeth were front teeth and it would have taken several strong men just to bring his lips together), his off-burr haircut, his hairy juglike ears, and his almost complete absence of chin, it would perhaps have been more accurate to say that he looked like a large fruit bat. Also, he bathed so seldom that he was starting to get boils. It was practically his only pleasure in life. At any rate, he made no reply to his mother's question—just went on staring silently at the mysterious letter rather as if he expected a mongoose to spring out.

"Orton," Mrs. Pesary continued patiently the next day when Orton still had not moved from the table or answered her, "what's wrong? Tell me, son. Is it something to do with that mysterious letter you keep clutching in your hand? Or do you just have a fig up your ass?"

Instead of answering, Orton rose to his feet. He stood there a moment, swaying slightly. Then, without a word, he brushed past his mother, went to the hall closet, put on his orange windbreaker, and simply walked out of the apartment.

"Hey!" Mrs. Pesary called after him in alarm. "You haven't been out of the apartment in three months. What the _____ is going on?" But a feeble "cheep-cheep-cheep" from the direction of the dining room chair was her only answer, for, in addition to everything else, Orton had been sitting on the canary again.

Time passed, and Orton did not return to the apartment. After half an hour his mother got on the phone and made arrangements to have all the locks changed—ASAP.

Meanwhile, Orton was preparing to embark on his bizarre kissing bug spree. After leaving his mother's apartment, he had begun to walk south in the general direction of the red-light district. It was a day of much wind and lowing skies. Orton, the mysterious letter still clutched tightly in his hand, marched along the sidewalk in his orange windbreaker at one speed--the speed of a sleep-walker or a very successful mental patient. At the corner of Eighty-second and Madison a large tin sign in the shape of a shoe flapped above the sidewalk in the wind--("D.J. & Sons Meat Market")—and it was at this fateful juncture that Orton encountered Cornel Petey, the famed novelty salesman.

"Watch them jump," Mr. Petey was saying.

Attired in his customary gray sharkskin jacket, natty half-inch-wide maroon tie, and green pork-pie hat, Mr. Petey was busy "pitching" to a circle of four or five gawkers who had gathered around his stand-up suitcase in the mouth of the alley next to the meat market. The item to which he referred was his latest novelty sensation—"Leaping Panty Hose"—an ingenious device made of soft flexible flesh-colored plastic in the shape of a tiny pair of panty hose that lunged and flopped wildly at the end of a miniature air hose each time the rubber bulb concealed in Mr. Petey's hand was squeezed. Mr. Petey squeezed the bulb with gusto. The panty hose jumped around spasmodically on the lid of his suitcase, exactly as advertised, but nobody in the crowd looked particularly inclined to part with any pelf.

Orton appeared on the scene at this point. Mr. Petey, with that fabled second sense known to all carnies and street pitchmen (i.e., the sense of sight), spotted him

almost immediately. Said Mr. Petey later: "I could tell he was a wrong-o the minute I laid eyes on him. Don't ask me how. There was just something about the way he looked, and that mysterious letter he kept clutching in his hand. I was also made extremely suspicious by his repeated attempts to kiss me on the lips. Have you ever seen a dream walking? Well, this guy was more like a nightmare. There he was, pushing his way through the rubes and coming straight for me—and I swear he was trying to look like Marilyn Monroe or something. He had the same way of swaying his hips and batting his eyes and pushing out his lips the way Marilyn always done. But, oh, brother, that face! I kid you not, he must've had fifty teeth, all of them in the front. 'Kiss me,' he says, just like that, and makes a grab for me. 'Hey,' I says, 'let's watch out whose goodies we're grabbing there, sport.' But he just keeps on with this nutty 'kiss me, kiss me' routine, until finally I had to tell him: 'Look, pal, please try to get it through your head—Cornel Petey is not about to kiss any guy who looks like a fruit bat!' That's what I told him, and I meant it. But mad, impetuous galoot that he was, he just wouldn't take no for answer." Well, obviously the only way out was to withdraw post-haste, which is what Mr. Petey did, taking to his heels the way a duck takes to wamma (what ducks call Seagrams-and-7). Which is why Mr. Petey was seen later that same afternoon running down Naphro Avenue with his suitcase under one arm and his panty hose under another, probably.

Mr. Petey's sudden departure left Orton alone in the alley with the four or five gawkers, and while he was standing there trying to decide which one looked the most kissable, three or four of the remaining four or five took off in the same direction as Mr. Petey, which left only one or two, chief among them a Mr. Ken Dull, seventy-seven, of Ann Arbor, Michigan, who was in the alley for the weekend to visit his daughter, Fawn Dull, a rag-



picker. I mention Mr. Dull's daughter merely to illustrate what happened next; for when Fawn returned to the alley a few minutes later from trotting around the corner to pick a choice-looking rag out of a city dumpster, she was just in time to witness her father being forcibly embraced by a strange man in an orange windbreaker (Orton). She was so suprised by this tableaux that she dropped her rag and, in the confusion that followed, inadvertently stepped on it, another metropolitan tragedy.

It was at this point that Orton abruptly transferred his affections from father to daughter, and began to creep toward her.

"Kiss me," he said, batting his eyes and doing his best to look alluring.

"Get away from me, you loony kissing bug," Fawn replied peevishly, stamping her tiny hoof. "Can't you see I'm on the rag?"

But Orton paid no heed to this, and just when it seemed as though he was going to be all over the luckless girl like a cheap suit, Fate intervened in the form of William "Mad Dog" Shields ("The Gentleman Poet"), who had just come out of the subway in front of the Flat Iron Building and now chanced to be passing the alley at that very moment. Mr. Shields, his chin hunched moodily deep in the folds of his dressing gown, had left his house that morning so absorbed in the creation of his latest verse ("To A Wild Stallion") that he had neglected to dress himself properly for the street. He was wearing just his trousers and dressing gown, and still had on his pink fuzzy bunny slippers. Indeed, "The Gentleman Poet" had become so absorbed in trying to rhyme "DOG" with "HOG" that he was absent-mindedly ankling along with one foot up on the curb and the other foot down in the gutter, giving him a noticeable limp that caused him to glance up from time to time and mutter vaguely to himself, "That's funny—I don't remember being crippled when I left home this morning?" Needless to say, his llurching gait was the most beautiful that Orton had ever seen, and straight away Orton felt himself smitten. In a flash, Fawn was forgotten, as Orton, murmuring "Kiss me, kiss me," hastened across the street to take Mr. Shields in his arms. (For, indeed, there is no creature on earth more fickle than a kissing bug. And so I say to you, young women and female rag-pickers of the teeming, hairless metropolis: let this be your lesson, that the deep transactions between a melancholic and the world always take place with things, rather than with people, and, strangely enough, these are

genuine transactions, which reveal meaning of some sort or other, usually in the form of comic books, old baseball cards, radio programs and fifty nude pictures of Bertrand Russell, all in color for only one thin dime. And don't forget, kids, when your mom hands you a box of her favorite breakfast cereal, which is none to good, your best bet is just to empty that old cereal of your mom's in the garbage and eat her box instead.)

But getting back to Orton and Mr. Shields. Having successfully managed to cross the street, Orton had taken "The Gentleman Poet" tenderly in his arms and was pretty much having his way with him. Naturally "The Gentleman Poet" remained too preoccupied to notice much of what was going on. He did, however, later remember enough to work the episode up into a bit of verse ("Kissed By A Stallion"), the opening words of which are:

"He kissed me on the ear, and he kissed me
on the toes;

If it had been Christmas afternoon, would he
have kissed me under the mistletoe?

He wasn't very intelligent, and he wasn't
very clean,

But——"

Thus, there seems no choice but to shift our narrative ahead by several hours—to the moment of Orton's arrest in front of the swank Statler-Milltown Hotel on West Forty-fifth and Pinocchio. In this connection little needs to be said, except perhaps to register surprise that Orton managed to get as far uptown as he did, considering all the kissing he kept stopping off to do along the way. A partial inventory of those whom he interfered with along his route discloses the following list of hapless individuals:

A street-sweeper named Spiegelman.

An icepick-bandit named Cassidy.

Two fun-loving sisters named Alice and Margaret.

A doctor named Ralph J. Keeno.

A butcher named Ralph J. Keeno.

A caboose-attendant named Rustle Butler.

A butler named Arthur Train.

Her cousin named Luke "Love-Luck-and-Laughter"

McGuff.

A man named Horse.

Three women named Eve.

Seven or eight people named Sybil.

And a guy named Joe.

It was Joe whom Orton was attempting to kiss and



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fondle (no relation to Mr Dull's rag-picking daughter Fawn) in front of the posh Statler-Milltown at the time of his arrest, having mistaken Joe's blue uniform for that of a popular doorman named Emil "Knobhead" Jennings, who was reputed to look with favor on just about anything, particularly if it involved "loving up" fetal rats and other lowly unborn things. (How he managed this nobody knows. Perhaps he ejaculated prematurely.) But in reality Joe was a cop of the old school, ready to clap the bracelets on Orton as he would an innocent person. Well, anyway, Orton wound up in Bellvue, straining at his restraints and making kissing noises at the attendants, and there he stayed, and as for the mysterious letter that had started all the trouble in the first place, it was never found—a gust of wind had apparently torn it out of Orton's hand back at the Thirty-second Street Abattoir while he'd been busy with the two fun-loving sisters, Alice and Margaret, who were known as fun-loving for good reason—and by and by the mysterious letter faded from memory and was forgotten until it surfaced a few days later inside an old snuff-box that was found in the stomach of a shark at a Southby's auction and later turned over to the police, who expressed considerable bewilderment over what they were going to do with a shark's stomach and finally just decided to use it as a raisin-holder, which, unfortunately, wasn't such a hot idea, though probably better than using it as a bonnet, and what do you suppose the mysterious bonnet—pardon me, I mean the mysterious letter turned out to be? A notice from Orton's local draft board! Well, Lord & Taylor, anybody could have guessed it would probably be something like that, and back in 1967 there was no mystery about a young man going off his rocker

and turning into a rampaging kissing bug at the prospect of being drafted and shipped off to Nam. Or anyway, no special mystery about it—only the ordinary mystery of vile old men sending young men off to die in senseless asshole wars. The usual, in other words.

But talk about inept goons who forget to gargle with Ben-Gay before they pick up their dates and social misfits who show up for cocktails with their pits reeking of last week's antipasto—they're nothing. No matter what angle you cared to view it from, Orton Pesary was the man whom smart hostesses everywhere hesitated to invite into their homes. For the fact of the matter is that, once Orton got his bearings and learned how to bribe the attendants into slipping him out of Bellvue on the weekends, there was no stopping him socially. One by one the guests at the town's most chic and lavish soirees ran gagging from the room, driven like swine before the relentless shambling advance of Orton Pesary, the mad king of the kissing bugs. The flash of an orange windbreaker across a crowded room, the halting tell-tale voice spookily intoning "Kiss me" from out that bristling batlike maw, and the party was as good as over. I think when it came to social intercourse—or any kind of intercourse—Orton was the most unpopular person I ever met.

But at least he avoided being drafted, and was a living unpopular person. THE END.

A MAD DOG BOOK



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